

Online Learning in Divorce:

**the development and operation of an
online learning community through a
divorce support website**

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**Report of the Wikivorce Research Study
March 2012**

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Key findings

- Wikivorce is highly supportive of learning about both divorce processes and practices and about how to develop and sustain good parenting during and beyond divorce.
- Advice gained through the site supports both those representing themselves in court and those using lawyers. This is likely to save people both time and money.
- The site supports divorce mediation processes by helping people to see their situation from the point of view of the other party.
- The Wikivorce community provides immediate and ongoing emotional support for those going through the crisis of marriage breakup.

Introduction

Background

In 2008, 121 779 divorces took place in England and Wales (11.2 divorcing people per 1,000 married population) involving in total 106 763 children under sixteen (National Statistics Online 2010). The process causes considerable distress to children and adults, and can involve legal battles over both property and child contact. In the face of the emotional, legal and practical challenges brought by divorce, many people turn to the Internet for advice, support and information. This study focused on the first ten months (March-December 2007) of a highly successful divorce wiki, advice and support site, Wikivorce (www.wikivorce.com) looking at the development of the site as an online community and the forms of learning that took place there. While members of such a community are necessarily a self-selected group, possibly disproportionately representing those having difficulties with

the divorce process and child contact arrangements, it is believed that it is representative enough to allow generalisations beyond this population.

While there has been considerable research into learning in online situations, this has almost entirely been carried out in the context of formal learning in schools and universities. The exception to this is research into learning in online health support communities, which is well established and which suggests that they provide social support, easily accessible mutual aid, and improved decision making among their users (Maloney-Krichmar & Preece 2002; 2005; White & Dorman 2001), as well as enhanced empowerment in discussions with health professionals (Kiera Bartlett & Coulson in press, 2010). This research complements work in both areas by investigating the informal learning processes taking place within an online divorce support community.

Previous research into online support and other issue-focused networking sites also suggests that they have the potential to develop into online communities of practice (Gray 2004; Maloney-Krichmar & Preece 2005; Wenger et al. 2009). A community of practice is a group of people who have a particular focus and over time develop knowledge and common ways of doing things in that area. Members develop their shared practice ‘by interacting around problems, solutions, and insights, and building a common store of knowledge’ (Wenger 2001: 1). In a community of practice, long-standing members develop shared knowledge and ways of behaving, and induct newcomers through a gradually increasing participatory process, in which inappropriate contributions are ignored or censored, while appropriate ones rewarded (Lave & Wenger 1991). In an online context, this involves more experienced users being encouraged to continue posting and support newcomers through implicit and explicit recognition of their expertise (Lee & Jang 2010), as well as newcomers

being welcomed into the online community and explicitly or implicitly shown its conventions and norms.

Communities of practice are central to the development of identity and to processes of identity change (Lave & Wenger 1991; Paechter 2003a; b; Wenger 1998). The development of a community of practice within Wikivorce supported individuals in dealing with the divorce process, and produced a fund of collective knowledge which was both shared within the ongoing community of practice and made available to new and transitory members. This supported their learning about and encounters with the formal and informal aspects of the divorce process. A particular focus of the study was how learning took place in the online community of practice, including how the community of practice supported members to move from feeling overwhelmed by the divorce process to being confident and knowledgeable in relation to it.

In informal situations, learning frequently has to be inferred from behaviour: it is not possible to test, or even ask people, in order to discover what they have learned. Consequently, in this research I have taken an inclusive approach to learning. I consider someone to have learned if there is evidence from the site that their opinions or behaviour have changed as a result of discussions taking place within the forum or blog space. I saw people as having learned if they moved from asking questions showing lack of knowledge or information to responding to questions with replies that demonstrate new levels of knowledge or understanding. I also considered that learning had taken place if there was evidence of shifts in an individual's identity or their overall perspective on divorce and related issues.

Research focus

Wikivorce is now a highly successful, award-winning online divorce support website, run as a social enterprise. As of March 2012 it has over 85 000 registered members, with an

additional unknown number of ‘lurkers’. According to the front page of the site, there are over 3000 visitors a day, and one new visitor per minute. The site is linked to a fixed price divorce service, and a ‘divorce options’ helpline. It has an associated zine, a space for blogging, a large resource section with guides to English and Scottish divorce law, an active real-time chat area, a calculator for estimating what one’s divorce settlement might be, and a searchable, asynchronous forum, in which members post and respond to questions on all aspects of divorce, child support, child contact and associated issues. Membership is only required to post messages and to join support groups; access to the rest of the site is completely public. While financially the site is supported through targeted advertising, charitable and government funding, and some financial links with legal firms, much of the maintenance, including the provision of resources, ongoing expert and lay advice and daily moderation, is provided by volunteers, drawn from the membership.

The research reported here is concerned with how Wikivorce got to the point at which it was able to play its current role in the divorce scene in the UK. It is focused on the first ten months of the site’s operation, from March to December 2007. The objectives of the study were: to understand the development of the site as an online community of practice during this period; to identify the different forms of learning that took place there; and to understand the effects of this learning on the identities of the individuals involved and on their ability to negotiate and move on from divorce. The overarching research question was:

- ***How can an online community set up as a social enterprise support people in negotiating the process of divorce, ancillary relief and shared parenting?***

This was broken down into a set of related sub-questions:

- *How and what do participants on the site learn about the different processes involved in divorce, including ancillary relief, working with a solicitor or as a litigant in person, and child maintenance and residence/contact issues?*
- *How and what do participants on the site learn about how to negotiate the social and emotional aspects of divorce, particularly when it involves children? How and what do they learn about successfully sharing parenting, negotiation with the other parent about the children, and how to work with CAFCASS and other agencies to promote the best interests of the children?*
- *How does an online support community of practice develop, and what causes people to become committed to it beyond their immediate support needs?*
- *How can an online support and information site contribute to identity change and self-development in the divorce context?*

Research methods

The study used qualitative, ethnographically-based research methods, aimed at obtaining a detailed understanding of the activity of the site as a whole during 2007 (Paechter forthcoming). Permission to conduct it was obtained from the site's owner, and the fact that the site is being researched is signalled by a notice on the front page with a link to an article about the study in the site's zine, as well as to my university webpage. I also maintain an occasional research blog in the Wikivorce blogging space. All participants are made anonymous through a variety of means, including additional pseudonyms and a conscious attempt not to link too many posts by one person together in writing up.

The data presented in this report is derived mainly from postings on the site between March and December 2007. First, I conducted an analytical reading of all the postings on the

site during this period (Paechter forthcoming). I read all the forum entries for the whole of the period under study, taking notes, which I treated as field notes. I did this by working through all the threads in a particular topic-based section, starting with the first thread in the section and continuing thread by thread. This allowed me to select particular threads that could be analysed in more detail, using traditional data coding techniques. I was able, through this process, to identify a group of 81 potential virtual key informants. Forty-two of these people were then followed up (using links from their profiles), tracking and analysing both their blog entries and their 2007 forum posts. This smaller group was chosen by the simple method of working through the whole cohort of 81 in alphabetical order by username, and stopping once I felt I could learn no more by additional analysis of individuals. This dual approach to the site content allows the community to be investigated both through the lens of the forum ‘conversation’ and from the point of view of the contributing individual. I also conducted asynchronous online interviews with six Wikivorce members (four men and two women) who joined the site in 2007 and have remained active in the community.

While the data analysed comes from 2007, and therefore my findings strictly relate only to that period, my experience with the Wikivorce site suggests that most are still relevant. Possible exceptions relate to the intimate ‘feel’ of some aspects of the site. Certainly some interviewees felt that Wikivorce had become less of an intimate space as the membership increased. This may, however, be partly due to changes in those people’s own engagement with the site as their lives had moved on from the immediate crises of separation and divorce.

Main Findings

I shall present my main findings in the form of responses to the research sub-questions.

Additional findings will be discussed subsequently.

How and what do participants on the site learn about the different processes involved in divorce, including ancillary relief, working with a solicitor or as a litigant in person, and child maintenance and residence/contact issues?

Most people appear to have arrived at Wikivorce hoping for this kind of learning, only subsequently engaging with the site for support with the emotional and social aspects of divorce. It was also apparent from the early versions of the site that this was the main initial focus. Emotional support developed from the way members interacted within the site itself, both in the forum and, once they were added, in the chat rooms, and can be seen initially, as spin-off from the more information-providing aspects.

There was evidence for a considerable amount of this procedural and informational learning within Wikivorce in 2007. It was not unusual, for example, for a member to move over a period of weeks or months from asking questions on the forum to answering them, demonstrating learning deep enough to be applied to other people's situations. Members therefore learned about divorce processes and principles not just as they applied to their own case but also as they might apply more widely. It was also noticeable that the community as a whole developed a much more nuanced understanding of the law as the site matured during 2007. Early responses to queries were often based on generalisations (presumably culled from other, paper-based sources such as popular guides to divorce) which might well not apply in a particular case or even be out of date. It became clear, however, that as time went on, the advice given by even the lay members of the site was much more tailored to specific

cases, and, in some cases, informed by additional learning taken up specifically to support others on the site. One interviewee remarked, for example, that he had ‘bought myself a textbook – the kind that trainee solicitors use to prepare for exams’ (interview, 2011) in order to be able to provide a better service. The arrival of two family lawyers on the site during 2007 also supported the learning of other members by providing the much more detailed and expert advice available from those practicing in the field.

One major feature of the site during 2007 was the demystification of much legal language. Although members were expected to get up to speed quite rapidly in terms of understanding a considerable number of abbreviations (e.g. FDR, FA, FH, LIP, FMH, PWC), explanations were always immediately forthcoming if anyone asked, and it appeared that Wikivorce was generally considered to be a safe space to admit to lack of knowledge. This presumably gave people greater confidence in dealing with legal processes and professionals. Clear explanations of the process of divorce were also provided both in the informational areas of the site and in the forum.

Although Wikivorce contained wiki-based information pages outlining the divorce process, people appear generally to have preferred to learn through asking questions in the discussion forum. This is for a variety of reasons. First, the information pages were incomplete for much of 2007, waiting for members to fill in the gaps. Second, it appears that people (not unreasonably) wanted advice tailored to their own particular circumstances. They frequently had questions which would not be answered by the general statements necessarily found in such overviews, so asked these on the forum. It is also the case that many people find it difficult to take in information presented in the large chunks found in this and other divorce guides, and prefer to build up their knowledge bit by bit through the question and

answer process. In this respect, Wikivorce provided an important service by giving people an alternative way of accessing information.

A major function of Wikivorce was to present members, sometimes quite forcefully, with how their former spouse might regard their overall financial and parenting position. This was not usually someone's intention when joining the site, but it was an important effect of participation. Partly because, generally, men were more likely than women to challenge other posters (Herring 2000), and less likely to accept challenges to their own position (Armentor-Cota 2010), it tended to be women who benefitted most from this situation. What might happen is this: A woman would post a message expressing anxiety about her financial situation and her sense of the unfairness of this position in relation to that of her former husband. This would then be challenged by others, who might point out, for example, that he also had living costs to cover and that he would be paying her spouse or child maintenance for a long time. This could (though did not always) lead the woman to reconsider her position and make an amicable settlement more likely. In this example, the original poster was wondering whether she was being too 'soft' in not asking for more from her husband on divorce. This was challenged by several men (and one woman) who felt that she was being offered a good deal:

Hey Megs , I can understand how your feeling but hey , thats divorce for you.

The financial implications are imense on both partys. May aswell try to get used to it as things will get alot worse before they get better. (male to female, August 2007)¹

After several 'turns' through the discussion, the original poster returned to say that she now felt more able to cope with a reduced income:

Hi to all that are showing an interest in this.

I guess..I was really frightened when I originally posted..

We have been in debt for so long..and really could not see how I could survive on my own. Considering we could not survive financially together.

I have grown up a little..from advice received and the little digs..

I had become frightened to go it alone, when I had not had time to prepare myself..

But I did it all before him and I know with a clear head I will continue to do so now. (female, August 2007)

What has taken place through this thread is a process of learning that there are multiple points of view on divorce finances. The original poster was challenged sufficiently to change her ideas about what would constitute 'fairness' in her situation, and also was supported in developing the belief that she would be able to cope financially. It is also possible that the other contributors (and readers) used the exchange to help themselves to understand how frightened some parents with care of the children, particularly those who have not been working outside the home, can be about their financial future.

The importance of learning the other person's position through Wikivorce should not be underestimated. For both men and women it could make negotiating a divorce settlement much easier and satisfaction with the final result much more likely. In that sense it functioned in an analogous way to mediation, to which it could in some senses be seen as complementary. For example, the woman last quoted came back to the same thread to tell everyone that she and her husband had negotiated a settlement which 'clarifies everything to him and to me..and clearly shows the fairness of where the money is going.' (female, August 2007). This learning process therefore has the potential to support amicable divorce

settlements, by gently (or not so gently) helping someone to see that their former spouse had needs too.

How and what do participants on the site learn about how to negotiate the social and emotional aspects of divorce, particularly when it involves children? How and what do they learn about successfully sharing parenting, negotiation with the other parent about the children, and how to work with CAFCASS and other agencies to promote the best interests of the children?

This question really falls into two parts. The first concerns how people gained emotional support from Wikivorce and the extent to which this made it easier for them to negotiate the overall emotional upheaval of separation and divorce. The second focuses on the longer-term issue of shared parenting, including the more immediate issues to do with the emotional aspects of child residence and contact cases. I shall deal with these in turn.

1. Getting support with emotions in divorce

It is clear that members sought and obtained emotional support from Wikivorce from very early in the site's history. Although there was no obvious space to discuss emotions when the site was first launched, within about six weeks members had begun to refer to emotional issues even within financial discussions. As one person put it:

When I first came to the site it was for answers to a million questions. I didn't realise that what I really needed was non-judgemental support and friendship.

And I found it in abundance. That support sustained me through a very difficult time and helped me rebuild myself. (interview, 2011)

An early feature of forum discussions was the level of empathy with which people's problems were received, and the importance that became attached to this. This was also referred to in interviews. One thing that people particularly valued was the opportunity to

speak openly about their feelings in an anonymous context, both in the forum and in the chatrooms:

The most important thing for me was that I could chat to people who didn't know me from Adam and yet could understand what I was going through. I needed to be able to open up and talk about how I was feeling, really feeling and not with the constraints of maintaining appearances. It must have been quite exhausting for those I did talk to. It was very emotional as I could talk about my real doubts and hurts and worries without having to think about keeping my veneer of normality. (interview, 2011)

Although the support aspect of Wikivorce is not directly related to learning, it does seem to have contributed to personal development, as will be discussed later. There is also some evidence that being able to access personal support, particularly in times of crisis, made it easier for people to address the more practical and procedural aspects of their divorce more dispassionately, thereby reducing conflict between divorcing spouses.

2. Learning about parenting during and beyond divorce

Parenting is an especially emotive issue in divorce and an area in which Wikivorce seems to have been particularly effective in providing support. This is of course extremely important as having mutually acrimonious parents can lead to poorer outcomes for the children (Golombok 2000).

There is considerable evidence that, in addition to providing parents involved in residence and contact disputes with practical and procedural advice, Wikivorce members were instrumental in defusing potentially explosive situations between parents by calming down the parent involved with the site, helping them to choose their battles with the other parent and presenting the other parent's point of view.

When entering divorce with children, most people have no experience of what is likely to happen and need advice about how to proceed, even if their split is amicable. Members asked questions about how and what to tell the children, patterns of shared care, how toys and clothes were distributed between the two homes, what were the best methods, times and locations of child pick-ups and drop-offs, and when to introduce children to their new partners. Frequently, however, members needed help in dealing with difficult situations that arose with the other parent, particularly if relations were non-amicable, and much of the learning on Wikivorce was concerned with this. Supporting people in developing new ways of parenting might involve, for example, dissuading people from criticising the other parent's parenting, or helping them to deal with derogatory remarks about how they dealt with the children themselves. Given that many people on the site were there because their divorce was particularly acrimonious, a significant amount of parental learning involved making the best of things in a difficult situation, such as when a non-resident parent was refusing to see the children or being awkward or unreliable about doing so, or when a parent with care was frustrating contact. A major aspect of advice in this area was concerned with helping people to pick what issues they were going to fight about and what to leave alone, and with reminding them that each parent had a right to parent in their own way in their own time. Learning in such cases was frequently about understanding the emotions underlying problematic behaviour and finding ways to avoid arousing them, or at least to ensure that the other parent's anger, unreliability or bullying caused one as little difficulty as possible. There was also evidence that people vented their feelings in the forum as a safer alternative to doing so with the other parent.

A considerable amount of the learning taking place around parenting was relatively indirect. A lot of the discussions about parenting were just that, with someone raising an issue

and people responding with different points of view. For example, a post in September 2007 by a man asking whether he should tell their three children about their mother's affair attracted 24 responses, all thoughtful and respectful, putting different perspectives on the situation. Some of these formed a dialogue between the original poster and a couple of others, with each coming back and continuing the discussion in its immediate terms; others took it further into a more general debate about what one should tell children. An extract from one post in this thread gives some of the flavour of this exchange:

Hi Steve,

I have to say I agree with Landmark and Tony. You are divorcing your wife not your kids. We've all been down the route of should I tell? and what's wrong with the truth? so I have some idea of what you're going through at this moment. I think you know how much the truth will hurt them right now and that's why you are asking the question rather than acting on impulse. When we are forced into divorce we have a decent side 😊 and a bitter and vengeful side 😡 they ebb and flow, keep an eye on them! (male to male, September 2007)

It is reasonable to assume that both participants and readers (bearing in mind that far more people read forum threads than post to them (Nonnecke et al. 2006)) learned something from the exchange, and that some will have taken it into account in their own parenting practices.

How does an online support community of practice develop, and what causes people to become committed to it beyond their immediate support needs?

A community of practice is a community participating in a shared practice (Paechter 2003b). Through participation in the practice, both newcomers and longstanding members learn together, develop their ways of doing things, and construct identities connected with the

practice. Communities of practice are localised and specific groupings; everyone is a member of several intersecting communities of practice, with identity constructed in and through our resultant multiple identities and trajectories (Handley et al. 2006; Wenger 1998).

The concept of practice is central to the idea of a community of practice. It is a deliberately broad concept, but at its centre is an understanding of practice as fundamentally social. Within Wikivorce, there was originally one main practice that brought people together and which they learned through their participation in the community. This could broadly be described as the practice of ‘getting through divorce’, and comprised such things as: coming to terms with the end of one’s marriage; learning to navigate the legal system; developing a new identity in relation to one’s new social status; dealing with the practicalities of forming a new household, either as a single person or with a new partner; and, in some cases, learning different ways of parenting. Through Wikivorce, members learned to be ‘divorcing people’, collectively developing the knowledge and understanding that required, as well as identity affiliations which could bring both benefits and problems. During 2007 a second shared practice evolved, at least among the central participants: the development and maintenance of Wikivorce as a community (Baym 1998). This second shared practice arose from the members’ feelings of gratitude and commitment to the community as a whole and their desire to perpetuate it over the longer term, in order to benefit others.

Wenger (Wenger 1998) argues that a community of practice is characterised by three intersecting dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire (Rogers 2000). *Mutual engagement* refers to the relationships that community members have with each other, and how they are organised around the practice of that community. Shared practice develops out of that mutual engagement and is shaped by it. *Joint enterprise* is the shared activity which binds the community together, ‘the result of a complex process of

negotiation that reflects the full complexity of mutual engagement' (Wenger 1998: 77).

Shared repertoire refers to a set of commonly understood meanings and ways of doing things that develop between members and are shared by them. Members use these both to express their identities as members and as a shorthand way of communicating with each other or solving problems (Gray 2004). Shared repertoire provides common ways of expressing what is important to the community, as well as marking membership through mutual and exclusive understanding (Wenger 1998). These three characteristics together emphasise the social nature of participation in a community of practice (Handley et al. 2006).

A community of practice develops on a site such as Wikivorce because individual members bring their practice into the site. What I mean by this is that each member is engaged in the practice of 'getting through' their own divorce. Once they join the site and become active posters or members of chat, their own 'getting through' becomes related to the more or less similar experiences of others, and a communal practice develops, which includes the practices being developed within the site, such as asking and answering questions in the forum, blogging or responding to blogs, and participating in the chatrooms.

People brought their practices into Wikivorce mainly by discussing how they were approaching their own divorce or related issues. These strategies thereby became a subject of public debate, and, to an extent, ownership. This was particularly the case in 2007 where the smaller number of active members made it possible for the community to follow particular cases quite closely. One member, for example, represented herself in defending a non-molestation order brought by her husband. In her preparation for the case and then daily through the hearings she posted regular questions and updates, which were followed and commented on by others. When she finally went to court, ten people publicly posted to wish her luck and five subsequently to commiserate when she lost. Similarly, a thread started in

September 2007 about mediation attracted 123 responses from 21 people, with continuing additions until February 2008, mainly involving updates from members about their own experiences and discussions about how to move things forward.

The overall process of members bringing their practice of 'getting through divorce' into the community and keeping aspects of it there was supported by a number of things. The amount of information available within the community and its accessibility at times when solicitors are unavailable was undoubtedly an important factor. Although in 2007 the community was smaller and responses to new posts not always immediate, the impression given on the site (even before it was really true) of an extant community with expertise to share was one reason it attracted new members. Specific services available even in the early months were also a draw. For example, the Wikivorce Divorce Calculator had been the way in for three of those interviewed. Two of these came from an alternative site aimed solely at men:

Well, one day I came across someone who has posted something along the lines, **FOR PITY'S SAKE PLEASE KEEP YOUR X2B AWAY FROM THIS SITE CALLED WIKIVORCE. IT'S GOT THIS DIVORCE CALCULATOR WHICH WILL MAKE HER THINK SHE CAN GET JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING.**

These were not the actual words used but that was the general drift of it.

So you can well understand that my imagination was titillated. (interview, 2011)

As the community developed, an informal induction process for new members got underway, with people responding to new posters by welcoming them or suggesting they try the chat room. This again demonstrated to newcomers that they had joined a functioning community

where they would get sympathy and support as well as informed advice. The presence on the site of people at different stages of divorce also functioned as an induction process. In particular, people who were further on practically or emotionally posted about their experiences, reassuring others that they would feel better after a while or giving a lay perspective on court procedures.

A noticeable feature of the site during 2007 was the level of shared repertoire between members. At its most basic level this comprised a considerable amount of taken-for-granted shorthand, particularly relating to legal language, as noted earlier. Shared repertoire was also demonstrated, however, through running jokes and other forms of humour, presumably intended to mitigate the otherwise depressing content. For example, in November 2007 a longstanding member started a thread called 'Let's Dream Together:

OK, I've replied to enough serious posts in the last couple of days so its time for something different...

Something lighter, positive and forward looking. 😊

So I am starting a community post about....

"My new partner will be (or is)....."

(add one line reply with your wish 😊) (November 2007)

This attracted nineteen responses, of which almost all were facetious, including: '...signing a pre-nup before we kiss! 😊'; 'LIVING NEXT DOOR IN OWN HOUSE'; '.... VERY LUCKY!! 😊'; 'breathing.'; '.... bought from an Anne Summers catalogue! (with a rechargeable set of AA batteries!); and 'would be able to navigate there way to the kitchen sink.' Note also the frequent use of emoticons in this thread. These were used either to emphasise the tongue-in-cheek nature of a message, or (maybe with a sad emoticon) to

lighten an otherwise bleak post. Similarly, many posters, particularly women, would insert 'LOL' (laugh out loud) in a wry manner even when describing quite difficult experiences.

Although much of the joking on Wikivorce took place in the chat room and in specifically humorous threads, it could at times break into otherwise serious discussions. For example in one otherwise informational thread about a member's husband being late with his court documentation, there is a whole series of running jokes, about prostate examinations, latex gloves, Belgians, Jake Thackray, Rambo, and doughnuts (these last two spilling over from jokes on other threads). The humour is completely intertwined with advice and reassurance. This post (from a solicitor) is typical of those in this thread:

Yes, Saltmarsh, it is quite normal to think you are up against what no-one else has had to deal with. And these circumstances actually occur quite frequently. The Judge will have seen it all before. As Rascal says, the Court give people enough rope to hang themselves.

Helena's advice is well worth following too, words of wisdom (still waiting for those doughnuts....).

But I would be saying to his sols - "no adjournment, and we view your deliberate refusal to give disclosure by not answering questionnaires as litigation conduct, and will be seeking a costs order". Should put the cat among the pigeons....

Rascal, I have a box of latex gloves, PM me to arrange collection! 😊

(November 2007)

Insider language of all kinds did seem to be extremely important to the Wikivorce experience during 2007, particularly when it demonstrated real practical knowledge. The use of shared

repertoire reassured members that they were among a group of people who understood what was happening to them and could give informed advice as well as support.

Because of the high levels of mutual support, particularly among regular posters or chat members, some people developed an emotional commitment to the site and to those involved in it:

there was a hard core of about 10 who all joined the site within days and became very good friends, both male and female. We supported each other through chats, blogs and private messages through thick and thin, every twist of the knife and I felt very much part of a bigger family. [...] What made Wikivorce special to me was the real people with real life problems, at all ends of the cultural, economic and social scales, and they all got the same warmth and support from other members. (interview, 2011)

This emotional commitment to the site and its members had a number of effects. First, it brought those that had it repeatedly back to the site: four of those interviewed described periods of having been ‘addicted’ to Wikivorce, an experience I share, as a similarly longstanding member. Second, it promoted commitment to the smooth functioning of the site as a whole. This was manifested in actions supporting the community: developing the wiki parts of the site by supplying information; taking it upon oneself to welcome new members or ensure that new posts were answered; acting as an informal moderator by picking people up on behaviour that did not support the general ethos of the site (which was not formally moderated during 2007); being present in the chatrooms at times when people might be feeling particularly unhappy, such as Christmas day; offering suggestions for new site elements; or volunteering to carry out technical support tasks.

The emotional commitment of some members to the site and the sense that they had benefitted from being supported by others also led people to feel that there was a mutual obligation to help other members. This was generally part of the ethos of the site, as is reflected in this post, in which the writer apologises for asking for help when she herself has not been around recently to help others:

Hi guys, soory not been on for awhile, life hectic with disseratiton etc.

Anyway, im seeking advice again. (October 2007)

For those who spent a lot of time in the forum it could also be the case that their commitment was developed further by the positive feedback they received and the reflective processes that responding to others enabled:

I found that I could help people and that help that I gave, enabled them to come to terms with what happened to them. This helped me as giving makes me feel better. And the more I gave and helped, the more I wanted to help. And this help I gave was like advice to myself. For the 1st time in my life, I learned to listen to my own advice. (interview, 2011)

As people moved on through and beyond their divorce, those who stayed on the site (and, indeed, those, such as the lawyer members, who joined as expert professionals, or who had already completed their divorces when they joined) seem to have seen their commitment to Wikivorce as a form of public service that was satisfying both in its own right and because of the grateful attitude of most recipients. This reflects previous research which suggests that people are more likely to share knowledge in online forums when their contribution is recognised by others (Lee & Jang 2010). One reported that when he first started posting,

To my enormous surprise I found I was – well not exactly showered by praise and compliments, but I certainly got quite a few, and it did my self esteem no

harm, I can tell you...So I thought I would stay on this nice site. (interview, 2011)

Another, when asked whether he thought there was anything that made longstanding active members different from others, replied that

I think it's down to a need to help others. Some people can become, say, doctors or nurses. They have this inner need to help others. Not that I see myself in this way.. But its that need. (interview, 2011).

This view was supported by a comment from another longstanding member, who spoke of the immense satisfaction he got from helping people:

As long as I feel my advice is valued, and is doing people some good, then I can't see why I would want to leave. I had a recent case where I was able to take a whole weight of worry off someone's shoulders; doing that is reason enough to go on (interview, 2011).

To summarise this section: a community of practice develops because individuals bring their practice into the community as it forms. In Wikivorce, community formation was supported both by the dire straits that many new members found themselves in, causing them to turn to the site for emotional connection and support, and by the consequent commitment of a relatively small group of individuals to developing and maintaining the site as an online community. Once the process was underway it became self-sustaining partly because of the altruistic commitment of a few lay experts and divorce professionals and partly because of the rapidly developing mutual accountability and joint enterprise of the core members, producing a wide shared repertoire as well as a supportive ethos enforced by an informal self-moderation process. It should be noted, however, that it is probable that none of this would have occurred if the founder had not taken steps to foster the illusion of an expert and active

site through a strategy of rapid response from multiple usernames. Ensuring that, from the start, all posts gained a reply, some (apparently at least) from other regular members, allowed the community building to have some foundation and supported the development of a sense of ownership by members.

How can an online support and information site contribute to identity change and self-development in the divorce context?

Answers to this question are far less clear than is the case for the others. There is certainly evidence of personal change over time: reading an individual's posts over the ten month period allows this to be traced clearly. The longstanding members I interviewed also said that they had changed over the last four years. It is unclear, however, how much of this change is due to interaction within the Wikivorce community or would have happened in any case in the aftermath of divorce, particularly as some members had counselling alongside their participation.

Among those interviewed, two directly attributed significant personal change to their experiences within Wikivorce:

I'd say that I'm much more open and communicative and that is almost entirely down to the time I have spent on chat and talking to that inner circle of wiki friends. (interview, 2011)

Unless I went into counselling, it would have taken me a lot longer than it did to get to the mental balance I have achieved. I reckon I would still be wallowing in self pity, with my head buried firmly in the sand even now to be honest (interview, 2011)

Others, however, while acknowledging that they had changed, were much more equivocal about whether this was due to their interactions on Wikivorce or the changes in their

situations more generally. It does seem to be the case, however, that for some members participation in Wikivorce is part of a more general process of personal change and can be an important aspect of it.

Additional findings

The main findings of the research point to Wikivorce as being a strongly positive force for good in terms of the support, both emotional and practical, that it gave to members during 2007. In this section I am going to outline briefly how membership of the site could also inhibit learning in some situations. In particular, part of the process of learning to be a divorced/divorcing person could involve taking up identity positions that might inhibit learning

How membership inhibits learning

Inhibition of learning within Wikivorce occurred in two main ways. The first is connected to what it meant to be a member of the Wikivorce community of practice. Relationships end for multiple reasons, arising from the interpersonal dynamics of the particular family involved, and, up to a point, this was recognised within Wikivorce. At the same time, and partly related to the joint commitment to providing emotional support and sympathy to others on the site, the community as a whole tended to view itself as a ‘community of the wronged’. What I mean by this is that there was an unspoken assumption that full community members, even those who had initiated their divorces, had been ‘innocent parties’ in the breakup of their relationships, and that problems within the divorce or over child contact were mainly the fault of their ex-spouses. This reflects research into divorce decision processes, which found that

the divorce decision involved a restructuring process of representations of partner, relationship, and self in such a way that it became clear which would be the “right” decision, in the sense of being morally justifiable, as well as the only possible choice (Willen & Montgomery 2006: 144).

Similarly, Wikivorce members tended to see themselves as being in morally righteous positions. This meant that there was a danger that, in learning the practices of the community, which included learning to position oneself in a particular way in relation to divorce, some people would become ‘stuck’ in a victim or self-righteous identity, and ongoing preoccupation with the circumstances surrounding their divorce (Sakraida 2005; Viukalovich & Caltabiano 2008). In this way, it could be argued that learning to be a community member could undermine an individual’s emotional learning through the divorce process (Barak et al. 2008).

Koliba and Gajda (Koliba & Gajda 2009) argue that communities of practice can develop a dogmatic adherence to internally developed beliefs. Although, as discussed above, membership provided frequent opportunities to learn through having one’s beliefs challenged, there was evidence that such adherence did occur for some subsections of the community. Non-resident fathers, in particular, sometimes maintained long exchanges with each other in which they castigated all women or all mothers as focused entirely on using the children as a source of income for themselves while blocking contact between the children and the father. In these exchanges, alternative positions, while put forward robustly by others, were summarily dismissed as wrong or irrelevant. Community solidarity, in this case among an assertive subset of members, acted to inhibit their learning through a collective refusal to consider alternative positions.

Finally, the group understanding of the community as consisting of those who had been wronged restricted learning overall by excluding from full membership those unable to take up such positions. Although there is evidence that those instigating divorce are also likely to need ongoing support (Sakraida 2005; Viukalovich & Caltabiano 2008; Willen & Montgomery 2006), individuals unable or unwilling to tell stories of bad behaviour by their ex-spouse were likely to be given short shrift. One new poster, for example, who said that she was feeling 'wretched' despite it being her decision to divorce, was told that she was acting like a spoilt child and would regret it later. Similarly, anyone who admitted to having had an extra-marital affair, even if as a means to escape a difficult marriage, was considered as at best peripheral to the community, and at worst completely excluded. The collective identity forged among the core members thus at times acted to inhibit the learning of others.

Conclusions and recommendations

Wikivorce is clearly of enormous benefit to a good many people. My research suggests that it is highly supportive of learning about both divorce processes and practices and how to develop good parenting through and beyond divorce. Advice on the site supports both litigants in person and those working with legal professionals, saving people both time and money. Although not a mediation service itself, it supports mediation processes by enabling people to see their situation from another perspective. It also provides immediate and ongoing emotional support for those brought to crisis point by the breakup of their marriages, something that is valued highly by members.

Much of the learning that took place on the Wikivorce site during 2007 was related to the development of the site as an online community of practice. This gave regular members a sense of belonging, with mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire binding

them together alongside and as part of the common practice of ‘getting through’ divorce. The development of the online community supported the commitment of members to the site and fostered a joint practice of developing the site further. It should be noted, however, that this was not true of all participants. Some very active community members had long-completed divorces, and others, such as the legal and other professionals, may never have been divorced (or, indeed, married) themselves.

During 2007 the legal advice given on the site became more nuanced and tailored to individual circumstances. This was supported by the practice of asking posters to supply considerable detail of their circumstances to support a personalised reply. An ethos of members correcting the misleading advice of others was also fostered on the site. This is extremely important: people do seem to accept what they are told by other members despite disclaimers by both Wikivorce as an institution and individual posters. As changes in legal aid provision in England and Wales take effect during 2012, access to personally tailored, accurate advice for those who cannot afford legal representation will become even more crucial.

Support for co-operative parenting practices post-separation seems to have been a particularly important function of the site during 2007. Members were helped to find ways to support their children through divorce, to work with their former partner and, where necessary, to fight for good contact arrangements between children and non-resident parents. Members were also supported in coming to terms with not living with their children full-time, with handing them over to the other parent for contact times, and with coping with the children’s emotions.

Community dynamics did inhibit members’ learning in some cases, particularly where a small group all posting from the same perspective supported each other in maintaining that

perspective against all challenges. This is likely to be more of a feature of Wikivorce in 2007 than currently, however, due to stronger and more officially set-up moderation practices. It is certainly my experience as a user that some of the more strongly worded or personally aimed posts made in 2007 would now be removed or edited by moderators. I would expect this to limit the potential for the formation of such groups, but it is something that the Wikivorce team should keep a look out for. Similarly, the exclusion of those who are less able to position themselves as the ‘wronged party’ in divorce, while it still seems to be a problem (from my experience as a user), is mitigated by the moderation process and an explicit inclusionary policy. Both these issues arise from the ‘down side’ of community processes and militate against the otherwise positive aspects of the development of an online community of practice.

The history of Wikivorce’s development during 2007 gives some pointers to those attempting to set up similar sites in the future. First, it is important, particularly in the early days, to provide rapid and informed responses to postings. It is probably also a good idea to have more than one person appearing to reply to posts from an early stage to imply community responsibility: the Wikivorce founder posted under at least two identities from the start, and was joined by others very early on. Second, although resources such as the Step-by-Step Divorce Guide are important, they are probably not essential: for a long time during 2007 this part of the site remained incomplete, and, though it was presumably a problem for some, this does not seem to have inhibited the development of the community as a whole. Indeed, one of the benefits of developing the community first was that it attracted more informed members who then worked on some of these resources themselves. Finally, the ethos of openness to all, even when it was not always borne out in practice, seems to have

been an important part of Wikivorce's success, both in promoting members' learning and in its overall longevity.

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¹ All forum posts and online interviews are quoted verbatim, including original spelling, punctuation, and emoticons. This is to preserve the flavour of the originals.